Pursuit of Self-Esteem: A Multifaceted Study of the Female Protagonists in Jane Austen's Novels.

A Synopsis

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Introduction

The immense popularity of Jane Austen, her novels, and her heroines, even after two hundred years, undoubtedly show the significance of the ideas and ideologies that each of the female characters in her novels resonates with. Austen's novels reflect unprecedented 18th and 19th C England's social life and the life of women in general. The bitter truths of the society depicted in Austen's novels prevailed and still prevail across the world. This makes Austen's novels worth reading even today. The concept of social realism portrayed through her characters gives us a clear understanding of the life of women in 18th and early 19th century England. The patriarchal system that existed in those times placed women in a subordinate position in society regardless of their social class. Most of Austen's female characters struggled to overcome it. The characters portrayed by Austen are not ideal women, but women with various character flaws. Austen's female characters were not portrayed as "pictures of perfection." They all were a replica of the society, some were opinionated, silly, quarrelsome, mutable, flirtatious, and insensible. With all their realistic imperfections of character, they stand out as women of integrity. In Austen's literary imagination women occupied a secondary position in society and through her diverse characters, Austen tried to present the quintessential dilemmas of women in general.

Mary Wollstonecraft in her Vindication of the Rights of Women (1792): "In the middle rank of life…..men, in their youth, are prepared for professions, and marriage is not considered as the grand feature in their lives; whilst women, on the contrary, have no other scheme to sharpen their faculties." The typical characteristics attributed to women are not innate, but forcefully ascribed to them by the misogynist society of those times and the women acknowledged it due to their lack of expectations and education. Chaining women to certain pre-defined roles in the institution of marriage is like restricting their minds and thoughts for an independent individuality of reasoning.

In her book, "Self-esteem," Jennifer Heaton commented, "Lack of confidence is usually due to having less or no faith in your capabilities and the worth of yourself. Many of these negative feelings are brought as by external sources that break your confidence at the very chance they receive." The negative feelings in Austen's women characters are initiated by the constraints

that society imposes on them. Jane Austen was a feminist but was not acknowledged as radical in the literature circle of her times. Through her women protagonists, Austen deciphers the hurt self-esteem of women of the regency era. This is relevant in the 21st century. In many parts of the world, even today women have stereotypical roles that they are expected to play.

Even in the 20th century, the circumstances were not much different. In the mid-20th century, Simone de Beauvoir encapsulates the gender bias of her society as one in which, "humanity is male and man defines woman not in herself but as relative to him."

Aims and Objectives of the study

This research aims to explore the amount of self-esteem in each of Austen's female protagonist share and how it is relevant in the modern world. Though Austen's characters were created two hundred years ago, the semblance of these characters to today's women is significant. The analysis focuses on the limited opportunities that the women of the 18th Century and early 19th century enjoyed and their attempt to preserve their self-esteem amidst all odds.

The research centres around these questions:

- How has the pressure of patriarchal authority of the 18th and 19th centuries affected the heroines of Jane Austen
- The constraints of the patriarchal system placed women in a subordinate position in the 18th and early 19th centuries. How did Austen's female characters overcome it?
- Through her female protagonists, Austen has proved that being purely emotional can lead to personal traumas. Austen emphasized that feelings based on sensibility improve the self-worth of a woman. Discuss the relevance of this in the 21st century.
- Was Jane Austen successful in awakening female independent consciousness?

Most of Austen's female characters are an embodiment of virtues and vice. The vivacious Elizabeth Bennet of Pride and Prejudice, the silly and meddling Emma Woodhouse, and the mild-mannered and ill Fanny Price of Mansfield Park are all likable forever. In Mansfield Park, we can observe that Fanny Price transcends all odds through her intrinsic sense of morality. She gives up a chance to become rich and socially elite by marrying Henry Crawford. She stays true to her values as a woman. Like Fanny Price, most of Austen's ladies emanate a sense of pride and self-worth and thus become an epitome of female independence and self-esteem which is relevant even today.

The hypothesis of the study

After reading and thoroughly analysing Jane Austen's six novels as primary sources, I expect to conclude that the fire of the feminist movement was literally ignited by Jane Austen herself through her vibrant female protagonists. Austen was the torch bearer of change in women's attitudes toward life, education, and marriage. Through the influence of her women characters, 18th-century women started to radically change themselves. Austen used the powerful tool of language to revolutionize the ideology of self-esteem. This reflection of liberation from patriarchal dichotomy is reflected in the latter centuries also.

Literature Review

Jane Austen (1787–1817) lived during the Regency era, an era of elegance and refinement in the field of literature. Wendy Monk represents Austen as a Regency country lady. "Jane Austen who was born 200 years ago lived in a small world both geographically and socially. Disliking urban surroundings, she relied on the English Countryside both for her happiness and for the background to her novels, which mirrored a society still largely based on the feudal village and the rural life." Austen with her distinctive and unconventional style has portrayed the pursuit of marriage and love of the women of the Victorian Era. In a traditionally patriarchal society, women struggled to attain independence and self-worth.

In a Journal of Rajasthan Association for Studies in English: Women Sensibility in the Works of Jane Austen, Trusha S. Vyas wrote that Austen appears to be conforming to the ideas and attitudes of her society. Her lady characters seem to be in the search of marriage but only based on wealth. Even Laura Angel confirms that in 2003; "Austen Wrote of immediate experience: The Microcosm of the Country gentry and its class-conscious insularity." Austen widely describes that women were not given the same opportunities as men in almost every area of life, especially not only in education but also in occupation. She says that women only depend on men. So, men will never admit women's superiority.

Research Methodology

My research will adopt an inductive approach where qualitative data is analysed and will be guided by special evaluation objectives. I plan to adopt a cross-sectional study by observing the events, characters, and social class of individuals over time. Through this research, the researcher hopes to awaken the sense of self-esteem, its value, and its necessity in today's world. The researcher aims to mirror the 18th century and early 19th century women through Jane Austen's female protagonists, their contribution, and their understanding of a paternity

society where women are forced into marriages just for wealth and social status. Elizabeth Bennet of Pride and Prejudice represents Austen's female independent consciousness. However, another female character, a friend of Elizabeth Bennet, Charlotte Lucas is contradictory to this. Many factors affect the self-esteem of a person like age, physical incapabilities, thought patterns, socioeconomic status, discrimination, etc.

The vision of women that radiates from Austen's imagination is centred around suppressed emotions and fantasies. Austen perceived the self-esteem of women as one that centred around humility and self-approbation. The patriarchal gentry of the regency era was an object of criticism in most of Austen's literature. Her fiction portrays the male dominant society of 18th and 19th-century England, and her views and ideas are still pertinent to the 21st century. Austen's readers can reflect and compare both time periods and critically analyze the situations.

Scope and Limitations of the study

The research is conducted to examine the relevance of Jane Austen's literature in awakening female independent consciousness and self-esteem. As a primary source, Austen's six novels are analyzed in detail together with many other secondary sources. The notion of self-esteem is one of the oldest concepts in psychology. Abraham Maslow, known for his "hierarchy of needs," felt there was a clear distinction between love and respect or esteem. He felt that an ability to feel self-esteem and personal uniqueness sprung from being loved and embraced by families and communities. As individuals, we naturally wish to excel or be exceptional, to be noticed for our unique talents and capabilities. Once one has some measure of self-esteem and confidence, one gains the psychological freedom to be creative and to grow as well as to be more generous to others. (Maslow, 1987, pp. 21-22). This study analyses how the female characters of Austen maintained personal exceptionality and how they have shown their inner strength and determination to stand against the male chauvinist society of 18th-century England.

Novels selected for study

The study is based on the six novels of Jane Austen

1. Sense and Sensibility

Published: 1811

Total chapters: 50

Sense and Sensibility centers around the Dashwood sisters, Marianne Dashwood and Elinor Dashwood. Marianne Dashwood represents "sensibility" and her sister Elinor represents, "sense" in the novel. The novel follows the traditional Comedy of Manners style.

2. Pride and Prejudice

Published: 1813

Total chapters: 61

"Pride and Prejudice" was initially named "First Impressions." The novel describes the conflict of Pride and Prejudice through Elizabeth Bennet and Fitzwilliam Darcy. The heroine, Elizabeth Bennet is an embodiment of self-respect (pride) and is agitated by the "prejudice" against Darcy's condescension. The crux of their turbulent relationship is the central attraction of the novel. The Bennet family is one of the best-loved families in English literature, regardless of their flaws.

3. Mansfield Park

Published: 1814

Total chapters:48

The protagonist of the novel, Fanny Price belonged to a very poor family. She was shifted to her wealthy relatives' family in Mansfield Park. This is one of the most controversial novels of Austen. The character of Fanny Price is complex and Austen's mother described her as "insipid." However, in the novel, we see her as a woman of moral uprightness, integrity, and courage.

4) Emma

Published: 1815

Total chapters:55

This novel is considered the last novel published during her lifetime. Austen deviates from her usual theme of marriage and financial stability. Emma Woodhouse resembles Jane Austen herself. Like Austen, Emma struggles to live up to the expectation of her society.

5) Persuasion

Published: 1817

Total chapters: 24

"Persuasion" was published after Austen's brother Henry after her death. The novel deploys the pressure inflicted on young women during her time. The heroine of Persuasion, Anne Elliot is a victim of societal pressures. Anne Elliot mirrors Austen's experiences of love and disappointments.

6) Northanger Abbey

Published:1817

Total chapters:31

Northanger Abbey was published posthumously. It is a parody of Gothic fiction. Austen engages in sardonic debates about the value and contemporary opinion of novels. "The person, be it gentleman or lady, who has not to pleasure in a good novel, must be intolerably stupid."- Jane Austen, Northanger Abbey

Project Plan

1. Re-reading the six novels of Jane Austen
2. Complete the secondary research
3. Develop an outline
4. First draft of the paper.
5. Revise, edit and proofread the paper
6. Develop a presentation
7. Submit the paper

Tentative Chapter Scheme

CHAPTER 1- Introduction

1.1.Life and works of Jane Austen

1.2.Objectives of the study

1.3.Hypothesis

1.4.Review of Literature

1.5.Rationale and Significance of the study

1.6. Scope and Limitation

1.7.Research Methodology

CHAPTER 2- Theoretical Framework: Self Esteem

The chapter will focus on the various factors that affect the self-esteem of a person like their socio-economic background, thought patterns, discrimination, etc. My research centers around the Self-Determination Theory (SDT) of Ryan, R. M., & Deci, E. L. which states that "man is born with an intrinsic motivation to explore, absorb and master his surroundings and that true high self-esteem is reported when the basic psychological nutrients or needs of life are in balance."

CHAPTER 3-Patriarchal authority of the Regency Era

The literature of the 18th and 19th centuries did not have much of women references. With the limited materials available, scholars explored the lives of Regency Era women. The studies focus on the various kind of discrimination against women. The patriarchal system often forgot that men and women are created alongside one another. Women were branded as emotional, less intelligent, and irrational. So, during the 18th century women were mostly engaged in agriculture, and no office jobs were deemed to be fit for them. In that century few women could read and write. Constraints of religious practices, law, and financial dependency affected women. The society of those times regarded women as tools for population growth.

CHAPTER 4- The struggle of Austen's women against the patriarchal dichotomy

The Regency era had clearly defined gender roles. Through her novels, Austen questioned the patriarchal authority of the Regency era. The socio-economic climate of the era disregarded the rights of women and they were often regarded as subordinate to their male counterparts. Women had a subservient role in the family and society. Austen was one of the first female writers to ignite the fire of feminism which later spread across the world. For voicing her

concerns, Austen used her heroines as the mouthpiece. Girls of Austen's time were deprived of quality education. Whereas, teenage boys received a good education. Women were taught how to be obsequious housewives. Catherine Hall described that women's education is designed to prepare them "to be used in the service of others." This chapter unfolds how the women characters of Austen combat the authority that restrained their independence.

CHAPTER 5- Conflict between emotion and sensibility

This chapter discusses the "cult of sensibility" that was predominant during Austen's time. Austen implies that emotional state and rationality should be connected. Uncontrolled emotionalism may lead to destructive consequences. Austen has demonstrated this through her characters, Elinor Dashwood, and Marianne Dashwood of "Sense and Sensibility"

CHAPTER 6- Awakening of female independent consciousness and its relevancy.

This chapter analyses Austen's portrayal of her women characters as brave, self-reliant, and willing to stand against the patriarchal authority of their times. Austen became the beacon bearer of the feminist movement of the early 19th Century and the movement flourished through her literature. Her revolutionary representation of women in her novels, asserted women demand equality with their male counterparts. In this chapter, the researcher hopes to explore the non-traditional female characters of Austen that tried to live contrary to the roles assigned to them by society. Instead of being stereotyped as submissive, passive, dependent, and irrational, Austen's women tried to be superior physically and intellectually.

CONCLUSION

In the concluding chapter, the researcher will reach a reasonable conclusion about the research questions discussed with the help of the evidence collected from primary and secondary sources.

Austen was the flagbearer of feminism. The wave of feminism that she rendered through her novels swept the minds of millions of women across the world. The plight of women in Austen's time and the plight of today's women are almost similar where women spend significant parts of their lives raising children and taking care of household chores. Many forget and sacrifice their dreams and even their self-esteem. For some, it seemed to be unpaid labour, but for others, it was an emotionally rewarding experience. The radical feminism in Austen pops out through her characters. She presents her women as strong and independent even when they were tightly controlled by the men around them. In her novels, we see that the female

characters forcefully accepted the “universal truth” that they were to get married and should restrict themselves to the boundaries of their homes. It was difficult for Austen’s mind to accept it. She lived at a time when women who engaged in cultural or literary activities were not considered socially acceptable and even Austen hid her identity when she started to write. She adopted the pen name, “A Lady” The accomplished women writers Charlotte Bronte, Emily Bronte, and Louisa May Alcott also hid their identities behind male names or ambiguous initials. This meant that gender mattered at that time and Austen was disappointed because of the unacceptance that the female writers received. She wanted to make the world aware that women could create exuberant and widely appealing characters and masterpieces. In Pride and Prejudice, Elizabeth Bennet says, “I am only resolved to act in that manner which will, in my own opinion, constitute my happiness.” Jane Austen proved this at a time when her social circumstances prevented her freedom of literary expression. Earlier, before Mary Wollstonecraft, the women characters were portrayed through men’s perceptions by male writers. Austen clearly voices her radical feminism through her characters. In Pride and Prejudice, she makes one of her female characters, Elizabeth Bennet, voice her view, “He is a gentleman, and I am a gentleman’s daughter. So far we are equal.” Austen’s artistry, biting criticism, and appeal is unparalleled even today.

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